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ABSTRACT

Drawing from the experiences of the University of Minnesota Technical College, Waseca (UMW), this paper provides a rationale and suggestions for promoting and integrating the humanities in vocational education. After discussions of the problems of interesting occupational students in humanities courses and the value of humanities instruction in student development, various methods for promoting the humanities are outlined. These include improving communication with student advisers; distributing lists of cultural activities in the area; organizing regularly scheduled trips to cultural and artistic events; and including students in informal cultural activities oriented around the interests and talents of faculty members. Next the paper describes the humanities courses offered at UMW, focusing on those courses especially designed to increase students' awareness of literature and art that represents or is related to the lives of many of these primarily agricultural students. The paper explains how the works of poets such as Berry and Markham, the rural paintings of Millet, and films such as Bogdanovich's "The Last Picture Show" can facilitate students' enjoyment of the humanities and break down the barriers of provincialism and apathy. Finally, suggestions are provided for humanities modules for vocational courses, such as including the works of Fox and Herriot in readings for animal health classes or "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" in automotive classes. (HB)

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THE HUMANITIES IN THE TWO-YEAR AGRICULTURAL TECHNICAL COLLEGE

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THE HUMANITIES IN THE TWO-YEAR AGRICULTURAL TECHNICAL COLLEGE

Ronald J. Nelson

At the University of Minnesota Technical College-Waseca (UMW), the central emphasis is on preparing students for midmanagement, semiprofessional careers in agriculture as well as in services to rural homes and communities. According to various indices, we succeed in our attempts to prepare students for these careers. That success is the result of many factors, including a commitment to the "single mission" of the college and a dedication to serving the student--epitomized in the oft-repeated slogan, "This place is for students." After completing their programs, students are indeed ready to enter the world of work, helping to provide food for hungry people and services to those in need of them.

We are less successful, however, in stimulating students in an important part of their education: exposure to the humanities. They often ignore, or are inadequately counseled on, the benefits of the humanities. Indeed, only 6% of UMW students enrolled in a humanities course during the 1980-81 academic year. This unfortunate circumstance may in part be due to scheduling difficulties. It may also be partially due to the mistaken notion that, practically speaking, the humanities have little use. Finally, it may simply be the result of indifference to the humanities. Whatever the reason, humanities courses have not been well populated at UMW. I suspect that, in general, two-year technical colleges--whether agricultural or not--are experiencing the same problem. Regrettably, students who do not enroll in such courses are missing opportunities that could enrich their lives immeasurably. While they are training to serve others, they often do not realize that they must also serve themselves by broadening

their outlook beyond the confines of required courses and courses closely related to their majors.

Thoreau, in Walden (1854), cogently spoke of the deprivation of spirit that results from failure to consider the needs of the whole person: "Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them." According to him, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." If his observations were true in the mid-nineteenth century, then one might expect them to be valid a fortiori in our time. Many people today have acquired a practical education, have used their skills day in and day out, and have been able to put plenty of meat and potatoes on the table; yet they hunger for something more. Like Franz Kafka's hunger artist--who in his last moment says to the overseer, " . . . I couldn't find the food I liked"--they yearn for nourishment for the soul, but are forced for whatever reason to go hungry, to live unsatiated.

Humanities teachers, as temporary overseers of the development of students, have the opportunity and obligation to prepare them for the feast of the humanities by serving the first course. We can assist students to enjoy the bounty that the humanities offer--at the moment, in the short run, and in the long run. Our efforts in the immediate present and in the short run will, I believe, not only help to provide spiritual sustenance for our students, but will also guarantee the long run vitality and continuity of the humanities.

What can we do to reach two-year students, especially in these days of declining enrollments and shrinking budgets? Basically, we must promote and teach the humanities very well. To do either, however, we need to extend ourselves to gain a general knowledge of our students' backgrounds and occupational plans. Such knowledge will provide clues for guiding them more effectively to reap the benefits of the humanities, both on and off the job.

The starting point, I believe, is the realization that our students, like everyone else on the planet, are simply human beings. They have common hopes, dreams, needs, fears, joys, etc. This common bond is the most important single piece of information that a teacher (or anyone else, for that matter) can have. It is to that commonality that the teacher must appeal. Beyond these basic similarities that all people share, of course, there are often common characteristics linking members of the student body at a school. At UMW, for example, most of the students come from a rural, agricultural background in southern Minnesota. Such a background suggests that the greater number of them have a willingness to work, a sound common sense, and a desire to test ideas practically. In general, they are pleasant, capable, and eager to learn, as well. After graduation, they take jobs as farmers, dairy workers, salespersons, floral designers, landscape technicians, animal health technicians, and assistant teachers in home and family services, to name a few occupations. Their average salary (for 1979-1980 graduates) is $9,195. Eighty percent of the graduates work or seek further education in state, while most of those who leave the state go to an adjoining state. Finally, very few of them report that they participate in or belong to cultural organizations (Hendricks, 1980). This information gives me an idea of the kinds of jobs they take, the tasks they perform on the job, their earning power, and their desire to work close to home. It also suggests, unfortunately, their general indifference to becoming involved in the humanities after graduation. Although this information is scant, it intimates the pressing need to promote the humanities, what courses to offer, how to conduct the courses, and what to include in them. Whatever two-year college we teach at, we would do well to learn what we can about our students (without prying, of course) so that we can more ably assist them in benefiting from the humanities.

Promoting the Humanities

Effectively promoting the humanities on campus is, of course, a necessity. There are many steps that one can take to arouse interest in the humanities, among them the following. First, one can speak personally with students' advisers about the content of humanities courses, emphasizing the advantages to students in terms of developing the "whole student." Although the main purpose of any technical college is to help students develop practical skills, it is also to provide opportunities for growth as a person. After all, the utilization of practical skills will account for only about one-third of the day, once they are out in the "real world" of work. The other third not spent sleeping can be enriched through exposure to the humanities, as can the eight hours of work. One can also try to work out hour schedules of humanities courses with advisers. At UMW these courses are often scheduled in the late afternoon or evening, thereby opening up possibilities for students with tight schedules.

Secondly, one can take the initiative to prepare and distribute lists of cultural activities in the area, after consulting the Sunday papers and other sources. If people do not know what is happening culturally, they can hardly be expected to attend such activities. One can, of course, use other media to spread the word: friends, classes, college radio stations, student newspapers, bulletin boards, student senate meetings, etc. A nucleus of interested persons can do much to whet the appetites of others.

Thirdly, trips can be organized on a regular basis. These trips can go far toward making cultural events a significant part of a student's college days. For example, many two-year students have limited experience in viewing live dramatic productions (other than perhaps high school plays). To be taken to Minneapolis to a Guthrie production or any of the other fine theatres in

the area can be a memorable eye-opener that leads to future attendance at cultural events. Each cultural trip--whether to a theatre, concert, art show, etc.--can be an adventure into a new world of experience for students and teachers alike. The impact of such trips, of course, can not be measured precisely; yet there is a definite influence (flowing in) resulting from the sharing of art in whatever form with others. Frequently, an intimacy develops between teacher and student from the realization that they have been drawn together by a mutually engaging cultural experience.

Finally, we can promote the humanities by naturally pursuing our interests and inviting others--students, faculty, and members of the community--to participate in them as well. One of my passions is poetry, so I became involved in preparing a little volume of poetry written by students, faculty, and people in the community, and embellished by photographs of local scenes. It is not a literary masterpiece, but it is a natural expression of several people's artistic impulses. In addition, I offered a poetry minicourse that developed into a biweekly study group in my home. We read, wrote, and discussed poetry on many a pleasant evening. A second passion of mine is dixieland jazz, and, as a natural outgrowth of that interest, several students, community people, and I met to play this rich form of music. Again, we made no pretensions to greatness, but we had fun expressing ourselves artistically and, in our own way, preserving dixieland.

Teaching the Humanities

With a general knowledge of the student body, the humanities teacher can decide on what courses might most effectively reach the students. At an agricultural school like UMW, for example, we offer in various quarters Introduction to the Humanities, Values Across Cultures, Man and Nature, and Rural Life and Literature. The latter two courses are especially geared to increase students' awareness of the literature that artistically represents the kinds of lives many

of them have led and will lead upon graduation. Humanities courses at non-agricultural technical colleges could be similarly focused. At any rate, careful consideration should go into selecting appropriate courses to complement students' programs.

In addition to deciding what humanities courses to offer, the teacher must decide how to present the humanities in the classroom. The presentation can make a lasting impression on the students in terms of persuading them of the benefits that the humanities offer, both on and off the job. It is indeed a subtle selling job that we engage in--but it is a selling job that gladly requires that we believe wholeheartedly in the product.

In the classroom we can attempt to get students to enjoy the humanities per se, as an adventure of the mind in which, together, we can enter for a brief time the world that the artist has created--whether expressed through music, painting, literature, etc.--then reenter our own. The artist's private vision becomes public and then private again to those who inhabit that world for a time. In the spirit of adventure, students and teacher can develop together by exploring the internal regions that Martin Marty refers to as "underdeveloped human territories" (Marty, 1981). Through the various media of the arts we can discover the connections that will enable us simultaneously to feel that we belong to the human race and that we are assimilating new perspectives and experiences. We are given the opportunity to view the world from someone else's eyes, thereby stretching our minds horizontally and vertically. When we are engaged in such activities, we are counteracting one of the insidious undercurrents of modern life, described cogently by Augusta Walker:

> The great out-drive is the necessity of our time. And perhaps with it the tragic loss of the internal adventure. The expression "internal" . . . means . . . the potent discoverable and explorable microcosm inside our own skins. . . . For just as space can be conquered only by the outward thrust, so there are certain other things that can be attained only by self-penetration. . . .
>
> (Walker, 1967)

We fulfill ourselves in the process of internal and external exploration.

In order to facilitate the enjoyment of the humanities, I deliberately expose students in my Rural Life and Literature class to as rich a variety of artistic genres as possible (from literature to film to painting to music, etc.) and to as many intellectual and emotional experiences as possible (from unpleasant to neutral to pleasant). But I do so in a way that I think will break down the barrier of provincialism, of xenophobia, that we all have to some extent. My primary concern is to encourage the penetration of ignorance and resistance--to reach what Joseph Conrad referred to as "the vulnerable body within a steel armour" (Conrad, 1897). I trust the cogency of the works of art that I select to speak "to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation" (Conrad, 1897). To accomplish this purpose, I initially choose works of art that I believe will relate closely to what students already know--in the case of most of the students at UMW, that subject is agriculture. Consequently, we delve into agricultural poems, like Wendell Berry's "Water," "The Barn," "The Contrariness of the Mad Farmer," and "The Man Born to Farming" (all from Farming: A Hand Book). For example, here is Berry's "Water":

> I was born in a drouth year. That summer
> my mother waited in the house, enclosed
> in the sun and the dry ceaseless wind,
> for the men to come back in the evenings,
> bringing water from a distant spring.
> Veins of leaves ran dry, roots shrank.
> And all my life I have dreaded the return
> of that year, sure that it still is
> somewhere, like a dead enemy's soul. Fear
> of dust in my mouth is always with me,
> and I am the faithful husband of the rain,
> I love the water of wells and springs
> and the taste of roofs in the water of cisterns.
> I am a dry man whose thirst is praise
> of clouds, and whose mind is something of a cup.
> My sweetness is to wake in the night
> after days of dry heat, hearing the rain.
>
> (Berry, 1970)

This poem and others are not especially cheery--and they need not be--but they speak with an authentic voice that will touch those who have a feel for farm life. The rich cadences quietly remind the students of what they know instinctively. Hearing and seeing the lines in print is reassurance of the value of their way of life and a reminder of their connection to the earth and those who work it. Other fine poets also speak eloquently about farm life, among them Ted Kooser, William Stafford, and Robert Bly. Still other poets, like Edwin Markham, in "The Man with the Hoe," remind the would-be farmer of the price to be paid for his choice of career:

> Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans
> Upon his hoe and gazes on the ground,
> The emptiness of ages in his face,
> And on his back the burden of the world.
> Who made him dead to rapture and despair,
> A thing that grieves not and that never hopes.
>
> . . . . .
>
> O masters, . . .
> How will you ever straighten up this shape;
> Touch it again with immortality;
> Give back the upward looking and the light;
> Rebuild in it the music and the dream;
> Make right the immemorial infamies,
> Perfidious wrongs, immedicable woes?

When juxtaposed with the painting of Millet that inspired this poem, the students have an unforgettable image of the hardships of farming. Even if mechanization has improved the farmer's lot, the student has gained an appreciation of the farmer's plight. This poem, of course, powerfully argues the need for the mollifying and uplifting influence of the humanities.

In addition to presenting poems that convey a serious feel for farm life, I interweave some fine agricultural essays, like Hazlitt's "On the Love of the Country," Emerson's "Farming," Greeley's "The Farmer's Calling," and Bromfield's "Out of the Earth." I also include lighter works, like P. G. Wodehouse's delightful "Pig-hoo-o-o-o-ey!" (the story of Lord Emsworth's passionate attachment to his

black Berkshire sow and the problems caused by the latter's declining all nourishment) and Mark Twain's "How I Edited an Agricultural Paper"--works that provide additional perspectives on the lighter side, thereby balancing the artistic outlooks on agricultural life.

To give a picture of small town life, I include a unit on small town newspapers--one of the best of which is the Rainy Lake Chronicle. The quality of the Chronicle is such that it transcends its genre, becoming poetic prose as well as strict journalistic exposition. It quietly goes beyond the destructive and transitory affairs of the world in the direction of a constructive recording of the affairs of people who spend their days in a small town. Ted Hall, the editor, has been the guiding force behind this interesting form of literature, which conforms to Ezra Pound's definition of literature: "Literature is news that STAYS news" (Pound, 1934). Among the other works that generate thoughts about small town life is Peter Bogdanovitch's film, The Last Picture Show, which portrays with startling accuracy and compassion what it is like to live in such a place. In short, I try to bring to my students for their consideration a variety of ways for them to view the world they know. It is a celebration of their way of life, but an occasion that is not wholly or even predominantly joyous--it is, above all, as nearly balanced as I can make it, interweaving the genres. The works often reach what Joseph Conrad called "the secret spring of responsive emotion" (Conrad, 1897) in the students.

Each teacher can search out works that would especially appeal to the kinds of students she or he teaches and, I believe, accomplish the same result. There are plenty of works out there that poignantly depict the subject matters that our students are familiar with, if we will only exert our energies to find them.

I also pick works that I think will take them out of their familiar worlds yet have some relation to what they already know, so they can experience vicariously the charm of others' environments or situations while sensing a recognizable quality

to their own lives, something universal. It is something of a surprise for them, for example, to realize that even in New York City there can be the emptiness and isolation of country life. To illustrate this point I use the realistic, but richly suggestive paintings of Edward Hopper. Sometimes I pick little-known artists who speak eloquently through their paintings, like Paul Delvaux. Such paintings as "La gare forestière," "Mermaids' Village," and "Phases of the Moon" have extraordinary power to draw the viewer into the haunting realm of dreams and nightmares. Their very tranquillity arrests the world in lovely, silent tableaux. They stretch our minds, making them flexible and more able to understand and cope with a world that is constantly in flux.

Finally, I sometimes choose works I have never seen before. To do so is risky because I have no way of knowing whether or not a poem or piece of music is going to work. When I have employed this technique (or absence of technique), I have been pleasantly surprised more often than not at how well it works. Students and teacher can react honestly as to the merits of the work in question without attempting to come up to someone's expectations. Such a procedure can provide a valuable attitude of receptivity to whatever works of art one encounters in the future.

Modules for Nonhumanities Courses

Humanities teachers can contribute to the development of students' growth by recommending that modules be inserted in other courses that focus on practical skills. Here are some possibilities at a school like UMW: (1) reading the works of Dr. Michael Fox and James Herriot in animal health classes, (2) reading Robert Pirsig's Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance in automotive classes, for example, to put across inductive and deductive reasoning, (3) discussing ethical considerations in the care of horses and other animals, (4) using paintings of floral arrangements by Renoir and others, as well as studying Oriental patterns in horticulture classes, (5) reading Upton Sinclair's The Jungle in food industry

courses, and (6) reading short stories like Herman Melville's "Bartleby" and John Galsworthy's "Quality" to provide additonal perspectives in business courses. Of course, there are many other possibilities that could be explored. It is our obligation to search out and implement these possibilities, if we genuinely want students to profit from the humanities. Humanities courses and humanities modules in practical courses can be an integral part of the curriculum at a two-year technical college.

Conclusion

The humanities do benefit the students of technical colleges. It is a mistake, however, to think that there are direct, quantifiable results from studying the humanities. Gains will be qualitative and indirect--although of course no less important for that. To expect overwhelming changes in our students' lives would indeed be quixotic. We must be content with modest gains. Among these gains are that our students have a more receptive attitude toward new ideas and new people from having broadened and deepened their experience vicariously. They develop an insight into others' ways of seeing things and into themselves. Moreover, they feel better about themselves because of the therapeutic and cleansing power of the arts. And, although Martin Marty points out that the humanities have always had their root in humanness rather than humaneness (Marty, 1981), I believe that we do become more compassionate, more empathetic toward our fellow creatures on the planet. If we maintain our former brutality and viciousness, we have somehow, I think, failed to grasp the essence of the humanities, which is conservation, creativity, and construction--not destruction. As William Butler Yeats points out in "Lapis Lazuli," "All things fall and are built again/And those that build them again are gay." There is genuine joy in the humanities, because those who study them develop more fully as persons.

On the job, students who have studied the humanities become better workers. They work better in part because of the skills they have acquired in humanities

classes, observing the texture and structure of artistic works, which gives them a discipline that may have many applications. They develop the ability to look closely at an object or problem; they often can analyze it and see it for what it is from various perspectives, appreciating its complexity. Moreover, their open-mindedness opens up possibilities of communication. In the business world companies are constantly looking for people who are well rounded, not simply people who have taken countless practical courses. These companies want people who can get along with others, appreciate others' perspectives, think soundly, and be imaginative. As Arthur Cohen and Florence Brawer note in The Two-Year College Instructor Today,

> because the humanities pose alternative ways of thinking, allowing one to experience vicariously what otherwise might not be felt, they open the individual to an awareness of varying approaches. This awareness in turn becomes tantamount to stimulating flexibility. Thus, we firmly believe that exposure to the humanities acts as a counterforce to rigidity. . . .
>
> (Cohen and Brawer, 1977)

Students who have experienced the humanities have a more acute sense of the value of their tasks as serving an ultimate purpose, as being an important part of the process, not just a cog in a wheel. Unlike Charlie Chaplin in Modern Times, who goes berserk after working on an assembly line too long, people who have studied the humanities have, I think, a greater chance of maintaining a sense of direction and flexibility so as to avoid being caught up in the huge gears of technology. We must keep the work world in perspective. As Mark Curtis notes, "A job is not the end and ultimate purpose of life. . . . There is more to life than work" (Curtis, 1981). The eight hours on the job and the eight hours off the job can become rich ways to spend our time if we blend our practical skills with the humanities. We will probably sleep better the remaining eight, as well.

In conclusion, there can be no question that the humanities are essential to the intellectual and emotional development of the whole person. It is our challenge to continue in our efforts to emphasize their value and to be imaginative in that charge. We shall then go far in assisting our students to live more satisfying lives and insuring the long run life of the humanities.

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